
Agricultural Biotechnology: A Farmer's Perspective

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I am particularly pleased and somewhat surprised to be a speaker today, given that I am neither a scientist nor an expert in biotechnology. Frankly, I have only a limited understanding of biotechnology. I'm just a plain ordinary family farmer from a long line of plain ordinary family farmers. However, this humble status has never prevented me from striving to make as much money as possible and I see exciting opportunities ahead to do just that: rapid improvements in the quality of crops, livestock, and livestock products; huge reductions in input usage and costs of production; and the creation of new consumer products. In fact, I expect that my family farming operation will be fundamentally changed over the next few years because of the things most of you are doing.

However, in the push to advance the field of agricultural biotechnology, farmers are often the last to be considered or consulted. Does the research always meet our production needs? Does the regulatory system provide for timely approvals of new technologies? Are farmers sought out to participate in forums like this?

At NABC 7, held in May, 1995, I met very few farmers, though I found our input in workshops much appreciated. This year, I doubt I'd see many hands raised if I asked how many people rely on farming for their income. Yet farmers are your critical link in the biotechnology path to market. We utilize the research and produce the product which then must be marketed and find public acceptance. And all this in a world where the anti-technology crowd is way out in front in shaping public opinion.

Most farmers are cautiously optimistic about agricultural biotechnology, but they need someone to take leadership in managing this controversial issue on their behalf.

Because the theme of this conference proposes partnerships, I would like to describe chronologically the slow and often tortuous journey of my own general farm organization in its attempt to foster new partnerships to manage the agricultural biotechnology issue.

First let me tell you about the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA). The OFA has a membership comprising 40,000 Ontario farm families and 28 organizations, mostly commodity specific. Its mission is to improve the economic and social well-being of farmers. The responsibility of fulfilling that mission rests with a seven-person executive committee that is governed by a board of 100 elected directors. I am one of those directors. So who would be better placed to attempt to draw together the broad range of stakeholder groups necessary to manage the agricultural biotechnology issue? It should have been easy, right? Not quite!

1993

In June 1993, the OFA hosted a workshop on the Impact of Biotechnology on Agricultural Production and invited agricultural leaders from across the province to attend. It attracted a disappointingly low 30 participants, but was the first attempt by the OFA to address agricultural biotechnology issues and, I believe, was the first attempt to do so by any Ontario farm organization.

That initial workshop had only two objectives. The first was to have speakers provide updates on biotechnology as a production tool in both plant and animal agriculture, regulatory aspects of biotechnology, and ethical questions associated with biotechnology and agriculture (not a subject any of us wished to tackle).

The second objective was to have workshop participants discuss their views on the impact of biotechnology on agricultural production, on our ability to compete globally, and our responsibility to feed a hungry world. Break-out groups were asked to consider three questions: 1. What did you hear today that concerns you?, 2. How should the agricultural industry respond to these concerns?, and 3. What is the next step?

The concern most often expressed was about the lack of information on agricultural biotechnology. It was observed that both producers and consumers need to be better educated with regard to this technology. One participant suggested that there was a huge gap between reality and perception that needed to be filled. Another individual questioned whether or not the production tools resulting from agricultural biotechnology would be universally available to farmers — all farmers, whether large or small in scale. It was felt that more workshops were needed, but a broader range of stakeholders should be invited. For the first time, the notion of forming a coalition of organizations having an interest in agricultural biotechnology was raised. We had taken our first tentative steps into deep and controversial waters.

1994

In May 1994, the Chair of the OFA's Environmental Committee, who also served as an OFA Vice President, attended NABC 6 at Michigan State University along with an Ontario contingent of farmers, professors from the University of Guelph, and farm organization staff. The objective was to become familiar with the conference theme, Agricultural Biotechnology and the Public Good, and draw on the material to develop an agricultural biotechnology position for Ontario's agricultural industry.

Then things became slightly complicated. A position paper planned for distribution at the OFA's annual meeting was never written. Even worse, the OFA Vice President, who had taken the most interest in addressing agricultural biotechnology issues, was not re-elected. Consequently, by December 1994, the OFA found itself in the unfortunate position of not having moved forward on the direction provided by the June 1993 workshop. We were in danger of losing our momentum just when farmers were experiencing frustration and controversy over the BST battle, and Bt corn and potatoes were quickly coming to market.

1995

The OFA had a much more productive year in 1995. In January, our Environment Committee, of which I am a member, nominated Paul Verkley, a registrant here at NABC 8, as chairman and took the initiative to identify agricultural biotechnology as one of our primary areas of emphasis.

In May 1995, four members of the OFA Environment Committee and one OFA staff member traveled to NABC 7 in Columbia, Missouri. The Committee made a conscious decision to utilize resources in this area, given their commitment to keeping abreast of agricultural biotechnology issues. While at the conference, it became apparent that the OFA was the only farm organization in North America that gave agricultural biotechnology this level of priority.

However, I would be less than honest if I did not report to you that some members of the OFA Executive Committee strongly disagreed with the Environment Committee's decision to send a significant delegation to NABC 7. Ostensibly, their objection was because of the cost, but I think it really demonstrates the subtle conflict within the farm community on biotechnology, and the real difficulty in developing a unified position.

Then in the fall of 1995, farm groups began to make progress. The OFA arranged a meeting where representatives from farm organizations, agricultural input suppliers, food processors and retailers, consumer associations, government (provincial and federal), and the University of Guelph conversed on the subject of agricultural biotechnology. The OFA was delighted that 50 people attended this meeting, remembering that there were only 30 people in attendance at our meeting in June 1993.

Part of the agenda was to ask all registrants to briefly outline the position on agricultural biotechnology held by their organization, agency, or institution. While that exercise clearly demonstrated the wide variance of opinion both between and within groups, it led to an agreement that some coordination was needed. From that meeting came a proposal for an Ontario Agricultural Biotechnology Committee that should have three distinct roles: communication, advocacy, and consensus building.

While there was some discussion as to who should take the lead role on this committee, it was quickly decided that the OFA, as a general farm organization with no particular vested interest, was best suited. By the time the meeting adjourned we had a long list of stakeholder organizations to be contacted and invited to participate in the inaugural meeting. These included some groups seldom asked to directly partner with farm groups, such as agricultural input suppliers, grocery distributors, consumer advocates, academics, and government bureaucrats.

1996

As of June 1996, the Ontario Agricultural Biotechnology Committee has met four times and, in my view, has been enormously successful in bringing to the same table a number of disparate players in the agri-food industry to discuss an extremely controversial topic. In the short time the committee has been together, it has established a mission statement, a set of goals, and a subcommittee structure that breaks issues into three categories: communication, research, and regulation.

The committee's mission is to foster the growth and development of agricultural biotechnology for the maximum benefit of the Ontario agri-food sector and the community-at-large.

The stated goals are:

1. Instill a higher level of knowledge and understanding of agricultural biotechnology within the agricultural industry.
2. Effectively communicate within the agricultural community, and between the agricultural community and society-at-large.
3. Influence future biotechnology research and commercialization.
4. Encourage a timely, science-based assessment of biotechnology products for potential use in the Ontario marketplace.

Establishing this committee was certainly an accomplishment, but not without some difficulties. For example, some within the farm community question whether we should be focusing our communications efforts on educating farmers about agricultural biotechnology. In their view the emphasis should be directed only to consumer education. There have also been questions

regarding the role of the OFA, or more specifically, the appropriateness of having the OFA's Environment Committee take the lead in managing agricultural biotechnology issues. And within the OFA itself, there is still considerable debate as to where agricultural biotechnology fits into their existing committee structure. But I ask, where would the issue fit any better than in the Environment Committee? Despite these minor irritants, I can tell you that the Ontario Agricultural Biotechnology Steering Committee is generally supported and acknowledged as the best vehicle for developing unified agri-food sector positions on issues relating to agricultural biotechnology. And as a farmer, I want to see that happen soon.

From the perspective of farmers, having unified positions on agricultural biotechnology issues is absolutely critical. It is ironic that the rate of scientific discovery in the field of agricultural biotechnology is advancing far more rapidly than is our ability to address the issues which are raised as a result of these discoveries. It has taken the OFA a considerable length of time to get to the point where we have now assembled a committee capable of initiating a process whereby agricultural biotechnology issues can be managed to the satisfaction of the agri-food sector. I, for one, look forward to the committee accomplishing its mission of fostering the growth and development of biotechnology for the maximum benefit of the Ontario agri-food sector and the community-at-large. As a farmer, I can't afford to have it fail.